Mesembs: The Titanopsis Group.
Hammer, Steven A. 2013.

Little Sphaeroid Press, Oakland, California. 208 pp. MSRP: $59.95.

The enthusiast of succulent plants often is faced with the dilemma of obtaining reference books that are either encyclopedic or devoted to a particular group of plants. Should one buy a tome on mammillarias or a good cactus lexicon with a generous entry on Mammillaria? Aside from utility, some publications are irresistible because they are beautifully produced and expertly written. In Mesembs: The Titanopsis Group, art and specialization come together to cover the botany and horticulture of an important group of mesembs for the first time. Along with its planned companion volumes covering other iceplant convergences, it will be at once an encyclopedia and a more narrowly focused reference book.

For those seeking a horticultural treatise, the time-tested advice of Arthur Tischer (1931) is reprinted in full as an appendix and is as germane then as now. In addition, Mr. Hammer provides wisdom earned from a long history of careful and consistent growing, such as the notion that plant “senescence” is a real phenomenon that can only be outfoxed by growing these plants anew from seed every so many years. This is truly a profound and useful insight and comes from Steven’s general tendency to emphasize the behavior of plants instead of their morphology. Such observations come from a rarified realm of horticulture, and they are treasure to the rest of us.

Those immediately seeking information about growing Titanopsis et al. may be perplexed that the Tischer fascicle is not referenced in the horticultural notes in the introduction, nor specified in the table of contents where each appendix is bundled under a generic “appendices”. I discovered the relevant appendix only by happy accident.

The genera treated are Aloinopsis, Delanthe, Didymaotus, Ihlenfeldtia, Nananthus, Prepodesma, Tanquana, Titanopsis, and Vanheerdea. They are introduced in brief, followed by entries for each species with notes on botanical history, distribution, variation, and cultivation. Accompanying each discussion is a concise physical description of the species as well as “dot maps” that are ideal in their scale and clarity. Unfortunately, no description is provided for any of the genera, nor keys to genera or species. One of the most valuable and appealing aspects of this book is its emphasis on natural variation. Based on extensive field work and horticultural experience few of us can realize, the reader is thereby introduced (hopefully not for the first time) to the idea that our concept of what constitutes a particular species is too often limited to one “classic” clone or strain that only hints at the range of colors, bumps and behaviors that is often observable in more representative material.

Superbly rendered watercolors by several artists are featured at the start of each genus entry and in a few other places. Line drawings, mainly of fruits, provide a clear rendering of some of the critical characters used to define and distinguish the genera treated. A large number of photographers contributed images that range from useful to awe-inspiring and they flow together in such a way that the focus remains on the plants and not on the different vision of different artists. In situ portraits are plentiful and will be inspiring to those who seek to grow these plants “naturally”. A generous portion of photos showing cultivated specimens, many of them in striking detail, has been carefully blended with the habitat shots. At a glance it is difficult to distinguish plants in the field from plants in the pot. A balance of art in these different media is not easy to achieve but Titanopsis makes it appear effortless.

A frequent plague of modern volumes covering complex groups—ordering component species or genera by putative relationships rather than alphabetically—is mercifully rejected here. In terms of further presentation, however, there is something to be desired as far as the layout of photograph captions. Three photos appearing across pp. 2–3 are captioned in three paragraphs on page two but on page three, another block of text appears in the same font and position and gives a second, different legend